



## Lusotopie

Recherches politiques internationales sur les espaces  
issus de l'histoire et de la colonisation portugaises

**XVI(1) | 2009**

**Afrique australe, Afrique lusophone. Mondes  
fragmentés, histoires liées**

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### Odile JOURNET-DIALLO, *Les Créances de la Terre : Chroniques du pays Jamaat (Jóola de Guinée-Bissau)*

Brepols, Turnhout (Belgique), 2007, 368 p.

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#### Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lusotopie/458>

ISSN : 1768-3084

#### Éditeur :

Association des chercheurs de la revue Lusotopie, Brill, Karthala

#### Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 30 janvier 2009

Pagination : 217-220

ISSN : 1257-0273

#### Référence électronique

Olga F. Linares, « Odile JOURNET-DIALLO, *Les Créances de la Terre : Chroniques du pays Jamaat (Jóola de Guinée-Bissau)* », *Lusotopie* [En ligne], XVI(1) | 2009, mis en ligne le 22 novembre 2015, consulté le 01 mai 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lusotopie/458>

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# Odile JOURNET-DIALLO, Les Créances de la Terre : Chroniques du pays Jamaat (Jóola de Guinée-Bissau)

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## RÉFÉRENCE

Odile JOURNET-DIALLO, *Les Créances de la Terre : Chroniques du pays Jamaat (Jóola de Guinée-Bissau)*, Brepols, Turnhout (Belgique), 2007, 368 p. + vi, ISBN-13 : 978-2-503-52666-9 (« Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, Sciences Religieuses » [Paris], 134).

- 1 As Director of Studies at the *Institut d'Ethnologie des Religions d'Afrique noire*, and sub-director of the *Centre d'études des Mondes africains*, Professor Journet-Diallo has crafted a distinguished career trying to understand the thought-systems and ritual practices of Sub-Saharan populations. The book under review is a major effort in that direction. It explores a central question, namely what are the social and ceremonial ties that, in the absence of all centralized authority, bind the egalitarian Kujamaat Jóola of the Casamance, in Senegal, and neighboring Guinée-Bissau, to their land and its precarious resources? Living in communities placed between the forest and tidal river channels, the 20,000 or so Kujamaat in the region have carved productive rice-fields out of the mangrove vegetation. Not surprisingly, the control of cultivated spaces, as well as those not transformed by human effort, lies in the system of spirit-shrines (the *ukiin*) which their keepers or officiants maintain, and sacrifice to, in order to assure a positive relationship between community inhabitants and invisible life-forces.
- 2 Focusing her research of fifteen years on the village of Esana – called Suzana by the first Portuguese settlers –, located north of the Rio Cacheu near the border with Casamance, the author skillfully outlines the general history of the region from colonial times to the

present, and then traces, in great detail, the particular trajectory of this village (or *esúkey*), which nowadays numbers some 2000 permanent residents. Formed by agglomeration, absorption, and dispersion, the inhabitants of the Esana *esúkey* appropriated the rice-fields and palm groves of neighboring villages, also seizing their shrines by violent methods, including warfare. But inter-village relations were not always hostile. In the past, as well as at the present time, the organization of ritual wrestling matches, and hunts, where strict rules concerning the distribution of game meat exist, serve to maintain cordial relations among separate community members. Turning to an analysis of the internal structure of a *jamaat* village, Journet-Diallo mentions the *quartiers*, of which Esana has four, and the more numerous *sub-quartiers*. She explores the composition and function of these units and then mentions the uses – such as wrestling matches, dances, meat distribution – to which collective spaces are put. Moving on to the structure of compounds, made up of co-resident patri-groups, she discusses the dynamics that surrounds relations within the houses where conjugal units dwell, keep their own secluded granaries, and cultivate their enclosed backyard gardens. Special emphasis is placed on the crucial roles performed by the numerous spirit-shrines lodged within each of these divisions in their definition and continuity. No less important are the attitudes that govern relations beyond the lived-on spaces where rice-fields, palm-groves, and the secular or sacred forests, inhabited by animal-doubles, are found.

- 3 Within these socio-spatial units are nested the essential kinship relations that revolve around the patri-groups or collectivities of agnatic relatives. What are the complex rules that govern behavior towards patri-kin? How do these guide the transmission of rice parcels at the time when a young man marries, or when an elder dies? In which ways do the out-married females (the *kurímen*) play important roles in their natal contexts, and in the homes of their brothers? Although a woman does not inherit land, how can she borrow a parcel or more, and from whom, in order to grow her own rice? In Kujaamat society, as among all *Jóola* groups, a special place is reserved for the sister's son. What privileges and protection from his uterine uncle does he enjoy, and what are his ritual duties, particularly when there is a death, in his mother's patri-group? If these attitudes towards agnates and matrilineal kin may be defined as generally supportive, what feelings, in contrast, guide interactions with affines? Even though, as in Esana, two-thirds of all marriages take place within village boundaries, why are attitudes towards affinal kin generally ambivalent if not hostile? These are only some of the questions Journet-Diallo raises and helps resolve using the wealth of ethnographic data she has collected.
- 4 In the discussion that follows this informative socio-ritual account, the author is, in my opinion, on less solid ground. In her rendition of 'la personne jamaat' she dwells on distinctions that separate such notions as 'body', modes of thinking, bodily parts and fluids, and so forth. While these are certainly important, it is not clear what precise roles they play in the construction of an individual person. The difficulty lies, understandably enough, in the fact that the Kujamaat are reticent to reveal these processes to an outsider. Thus, what really, defines and constitutes the *yaloor*, or soul, is ill-defined. And there is little new that Journet-Diallo has added to J. David Sapir's excellent discussion of the *siúúm* or animal doubles. These are complex notions requiring a mastery of the local language that we don't know whether the author possesses. It is here that we should mention the outstanding research done on various *Jóola* groups by ethnographers with a high degree of language competence.

- 5 In the following chapter, where she discusses various kinds of conflicts and disputes, Journet-Diallo is, once more, at her analytic best. She pursues the subtle meanings conveyed by the concept *elob*, grave words whose utterance threatens the social and familial peace. Two contexts where familial tensions, including the suspicion of murder, erupt are the public judgment, attended by village notables and a numerous public, and the questioning of the deceased to determine the cause of death, and to elicit his comments about village problems. The example of a judgment that she provides, one that concerns an accusation of theft, complicated by a breach of the rights of a young man vis à vis his maternal uncle, and the suspicion that a sacrifice of personal revenge has been committed, is particularly revealing. This emotional affair was not intended to accuse or punish the culprit but to reiterate the principles that should guide proper interfamilial relations, including the rights of access to rice fields, and to palm products, by a sister's son. The interrogation of the corpse is one of the most dramatic rituals 'traditional' (non-Muslim or Christian) Jóola perform. After sacrificing to the relevant spirit-shrines, the deceased is placed on a stretcher, adorned with bull horns, that is carried by four of men. Facing the individual who is posing the questions – who can be anyone of those present – the stretcher is made to advance, to indicate an affirmative answer to the proposed causes of death, or to retreat, to signal a negative response. The purpose of this divinatory exercise is for the person who is questioning the corpse to absolve himself of all suspicion concerning the death. By providing three well-chosen examples, Journet-Diallo vividly conveys a sense of the kinds of questions that are asked, and the manner in which the past actions of the deceased, and his interactions with others, is revealed. At the end, she lists the principal causes of death as being witchcraft, the improper use of spiritual power or, more commonly, a transgression committed towards a spirit-shrine. All these unacceptable conducts must be expiated through a sacrificial rite.
- 6 In Chapter 4, the author explores the central Kujaamat notion of *ñiñi*, that she aptly translates as 'forbidden' (acts), such as theft, murder, the neglect of agrarian rituals, the revelation of forbidden knowledge, and so forth. In one way or another, these behaviors overstep boundaries, be they between the genders, among times and spaces, or amid certain kinds of knowledge and actions. Like other transgressions, these polluting behaviors must be expiated by performing a sacrifice. Crucial to the construction of female identity are the rites surrounding the first menses, and the subsequent act of giving birth. Crucial to the construction of male identity are a series of rituals, the most important being the boys' initiation or *búkut*. This spectacular affair, which villages celebrate in rotation, takes place in every 40 years or so, involves hundreds of visitors, tons of rice, numerous cattle, gallons of palm wine. Although, as a woman, Journet-Diallo was forbidden from participating in the *búkut*, she provides a rich description of this lengthy ceremony by referring to published accounts of male authors who have witnessed its many lengthy phases. Another important ritual emphasizing sexual separation she discusses is the *buñalen*, with its self-deprecatory acts and exile period, which sterile women, or those who have lost many infants, undergo.
- 7 All these rituals, the author reminds us, revolve around the spirit-shrines or *ukiin* (sg. *bákiin*), some more important than others, some reserved for men, others for women, and others to both genders. Their presence may be signaled by a simple forked stick in the ground, a clay pot, or a more elaborate small mound adorned with horns, feathers, or clay shards. Under the orders of *Emitey*, the distant but supreme being, the *ukiin* must be regularly sacrificed to with blood or palm-wine by those persons charged with their keep,

and often on behalf of a person who has been ‘trapped’ by the spirit for having committed an offense. The officiant of a *bákiin* inherits the post agnatically, not without offering resistance, for it often involves considerable expenses, especially when it comes to the *áyi* or ‘king’, whose every action is subject to interdictions. Divided into two large categories, the *ukiin* designated by a ‘staff’ have different attributes, perform unique functions, and are transmitted in dissimilar ways from those designated by a ‘harpoon’. There are also spirit-shrines that are immovable, and others that are transmitted, though never directly from parent to offspring. Rich in meaning and action, the attributes of *ukiin* are described by Journet-Diallo in vivid detail which, unfortunately, constraints of space does not permit us to recapture.

- 8 The sacrifice – or *kayúken*, wetting the ground – represents the primordial act through which every *báakin* is constantly propitiated on occasions such as divination, curing an illness, redressing a transgression, augmenting the rice yields, fighting drought and epidemics, organizing wrestling matches, transferring a shrine. At such times, domestic animals are sacrificed, and a large quantity of palm wine is poured on the shrine as a libation while the officiant (the *awañen*) goes through some well-defined steps, including entering and leaving the shrine, addressing the spirit and, always, sacrificing to it. Of particular interest to me are the rites surrounding the agrarian cycle, all of which are tightly linked to sexual symbolism and procreation. Before cultivation of the rice fields begin, the work season must be initiated by sacrificing. Clearing the old vegetation, ridging and furrowing a parcel, seeding the nurseries, transplanting, and harvesting, are all under the tutelage of one or another of the village’s spirit-shrines. Controlled either by men or by women, the *ukiin* are usually propitiated, either collectively or individually, with palm-wine libations. After the harvest, a series of important rites take place, at the end of which the *ekonkon* dances, and the wrestling matches, begin. The table provided by the author to summarize the ritual cycle and its links with steps in agrarian activities is especially helpful.
- 9 Not surprisingly, Kujamaat notions surrounding the sacrifice came into direct conflict with the dogma preached by the Catholic missionaries that settled in Esana in 1930. Refusing to participate in collective sacrifices, accused of revealing the secrets of the *ukiin*, and forbidding boys to participate in the grand initiation or *búkut*, the new converts established their own *quartier*, an event that did not end tensions with traditionalists. Also, what began as cordial relations between Esana residents and immigrant Muslim Fula ended up in discord as well. Yet, deep within their being, Kujamaat converts to a new religion still hope that there is an *awañen* who continues to ‘wet the ground’.
- 10 Whereas Journet-Diallo provides a lengthy and learned introduction to her book, she finishes the work with only a brief and disappointing conclusion. Surely, at the end, there are important theoretical points to re-iterate and re-visit concerning the crucial role played by the spirit-shrines in the social functioning of the Esana village. And there are fruitful comparisons with other Jóola groups, and beyond, to be pursued. This said, one should certainly recognize that this is a fascinating and valuable account of what constitutes a formidable ritual link between Jóola village residents and their land, mediated by the power of the *ukiin* or spirit-shrines.
- 11 June 2008